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Do parties perceive their voter potentials correctly? Reconsidering the spatial logic of electoral competition

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Abstract

Political parties strive for maximizing their vote shares. One way to achieve this goal is to attract voters from competitors. A precondition for strategies aiming at attracting these voters is that parties perceive their voter potentials among their rivals' electorates correctly. Yet, hardly anything is known about such perceptions. To fill this gap, we develop analogue measures of a party's perceived and its actual voter potential for each competitor in a party system. Combining elite and mass surveys conducted in Germany, we show that perceived and actual voter potentials depend on spatial considerations but also that not all parties are able to correctly evaluate their potentials. These deviations can be traced back to differences in the perceived placement of political actors between elites and citizens. This supports the spatial logic of party competition, but it also points to potential pitfalls for strategic behavior of political parties.

Keywords: spatial models, party competition, voter potentials, parties' perceptions

1 Introduction[1]

Do political parties perceive their voter potential among the electorates of rival parties correctly? Operating under conditions in which strategic decisions regarding policy shifts are necessary but also potentially very costly, this question is of utmost importance for political parties as it is a precondition to make correct decisions in order to maximize their vote share. Most of the extensive literature analyzing parties' strategic behavior (cf. Adams 2012) is grounded in the spatial theory of party competition (Downs 1957). This framework assumes that parties possess information on where their voter potential is located in the competitive space and are therefore able to behave strategically. This postulation is especially prominent in research on strategic party re-positioning and adaptation to competitor parties, suggesting that parties adapt their left-right position in response to public opinion shifts (Adams et al. 2004; Adams et al. 2006; Ezrow et al. 2011) and to left-right shifts of rival parties (Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009; Williams 2015). Yet, there is to date no study testing whether parties are actually accurately informed about their voter potentials.

In this paper, we test this core assumption of spatial models empirically by asking in how far political parties perceive their potentials to win voters from other parties correctly. Thereby, we reconsider the most important precondition for political parties' ability to position themselves strategically when trying to increase their vote shares. Based on the traditional spatial approach to party competition, which argues that voters' party preferences are primarily driven by spatial proximities, we hypothesize that parties' perceptions of voter potentials are structured by such as well. More specifically, we investigate the match between a receiving party's perception of its voter potential among the voters of a second party — the target party — on the one hand and the potential the former actually has among the electorate of the latter on the other hand. We do so by combining unique data from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) candidate survey on the perceptions of voter potentials with data on actual voter potentials derived from the GLES post-election cross section survey. Electoral candidates for

[1]Earlier drafts of this paper were presented at the 2018 ECPR General Conference in Hamburg and at a workshop at the WZB Berlin Social Science Center. We would like to thank all participants for their feedback, and particularly Susumu Shikano and Philippe Joly for their comments. Furthermore, we are grateful to Arne Carstens and Lena Röllicke for their help preparing the manuscript and to the anonymous reviewers for their useful suggestions to improve the paper.

national elections constitute the mid- to high-level party elites and are crucial actors not only for campaign communication but also internally for the parties' organization and programmatic portfolio. Most strategically important decisions might be made by a small circle of party officials; however, even these decisions will be strongly influenced by electoral candidates.

Additionally, we analyze why parties perceive their voter potentials (in-)correctly. We argue that spatial perceptions can vary between parties and voters, potentially distorting parties' perceptions of voter potentials among their competitors' electorates. Our findings suggest that — while spatial considerations regarding the left-right dimension are relevant for both perceived and, to an even stronger degree, actual voter potential — not all parties are equally able to perceive their voter potential correctly. These deviations can be traced back to differences between parties and citizens when it comes to locating political actors in the competitive space.

Understanding the factors leading to voter potential misperceptions is crucial as such misperceptions can have severe practical consequences for parties' ability to maximize their vote share. We conclude that future research not only has to take into account differences in locating parties but also has to incorporate non-spatial factors for a more comprehensive picture. Such additional knowledge could help to refine models of party competition and their theoretical underpinnings.

2 Theoretical considerations

There is a vast amount of literature investigating parties' strategic behavior to maximize their vote shares (for a summary see Adams 2012. The majority of studies are based on assumptions derived from the spatial model of party competition (Downs 1957) which provides both assumptions about ideal party behavior as well as voter motivations for party choice.[2] According to this model, and following the rational-choice framework, citizens vote for the party which they expect to yield the highest utility. In most accounts, party utility is thought to be based primarily on spatial considerations:[3] The

[2]Albeit much less common, spatial models can also be based on the idea of directional voting and discounting for problems of policy implementation (Grofman 1985; Rabinowitz and Macdonald 1989). In this study, we focus on the dominant proximity approach; however, we believe that any argument provided here could be translated to the discounting or directional approach as well.

[3]Certainly, party utility is not determined solely by spatial considerations. Among others, voters use a variety of criteria, e.g. party identification (Campbell et al. 1960),

closer a party's policy preference is to a voter's ideal point in a policy space, the higher the utility. Clearly, such considerations necessitate an unrealistic and costly amount of information on the part of the voter. Voters not only have to develop preferences on a multitude of policy issues but also have to be aware of the respective issue positions of all parties. Therefore, Downs (and others) argued that instead of several specific issue dimensions, citizens rely on one-dimensional simplifications — the most important one being the left-right dimension (Mair 2009). Consequently, voters only have to assess their proximity to parties regarding the left-right dimension to derive a utility for every party.

Looking to developments of party systems and electoral behavior all over the world, we acknowledge that a more fitting description of the competitive space might be a two-dimensional description which distinguishes a socio-economic and a socio-cultural dimension (e.g., Kitschelt and McGann 1995. However, recent research suggests that left-right, while non-linearly related to positions in the two-dimensional space, still represents a crucial orientation for voters (Lachat 2018) and that, for example, perceptions of party positions regarding the left-right dimension can be explained by perceptions regarding the sub-dimensions as well as the salience of these sub-dimensions (Giebler and Wagner 2019).[4] Furthermore, focusing on left-right as the super issue of political competition (Fuchs and Klingemann 1989) is still the most widely used approach in comparative studies of party and electoral competition In comparative contexts, the left-right dimension can be considered favorable as it "makes it possible to circumnavigate the potentially intractable problem of how to establish the equivalence of policy issues across countries (as well as across elections within the same country)" (Schmitt-Beck 2019). In addition, all arguments developed below can be translated to an n-dimensional policy space. Therefore, we stick to the classic, one-dimensional left-right approach.

performance evaluations (Fiorina 1981) or strategic considerations (Duverger 1963) to decide which party to vote for. However, the focus of this study lies on the role spatial factors play with regards to parties' perceptions of their voter potentials, providing some novel but also easy to comprehend testing. Adding non-spatial considerations to the equation clearly constitutes an important step for additional, follow-up research but also constitutes to a certain degree a second step before the first. Nevertheless, the spatial arguments outlined in this section are validated by robustness checks which also include the most fundamental non-spatial factors (see end of results section and the supplementary material).

[4]Below, we validate the relevance of the left-right dimension for the purpose of our study empirically (see methods section and tables A1 and A2 in the supplementary material).

Although in most electoral systems, voters can only cast one vote, a person might consider several parties before deciding which one to vote for. After having derived a respective utility for every competing party, a voter arrives at a specific consideration set, which represents a subset of parties with high(er) utility from which the voter actually chooses (van der Brug et al. 2007). In addition, as the parties in the consideration set share high utility, we can assume that vote-switching between these parties is likely in future elections.

Translated to the political supply side of parties, we argue that this vote-switching potential implies that all parties included in the consideration set of a voter can conceive of this individual as a potential voter. In other words, political parties' voter potentials can be derived from the voters' consideration sets, thus including actual voters as well as those citizens who at least consider voting for the respective party. According to Bartolini (2002), such voter potentials are crucial for democracy as they lead political parties to respond to (changing) voter preferences, thereby ensuring the unintended value of political competition: responsiveness due to vulnerability. The voter potential of a party basically consists of two distinct groups: the first group is constituted by a party's voters. If political actors feel vulnerable, they try to adapt to the policy preferences of their voters to keep them aligned. However, vote maximizing is not limited to reacting to vulnerability but also refers to attracting as many voters as possible — and in the context of inter-party competition, it is especially winning over voters from rival parties that is of relevance. Hence, our focus lies on this second group, those citizens who do not yet vote for the party but consider doing so. It is this latter aspect of political competition between parties that we are interested in. Correspondingly, parties are assumed to adapt in a strategic way to attract voters of rival parties. This becomes possible if these voters perceive the party as being part of their consideration set.[5]

In the literature, it is predominantly the Downsian model that is used to theorize these adaptive processes. The basic spatial model of party behavior suggests that parties aim to maximize their vote share and hence try to minimize their spatial distance to as many potential voters as possible. Clearly, not all parties are equally oriented towards vote-maximizing or vote-seeking (Strøm 1989). However, regardless which strategy a party is primarily following, it needs to correctly assess their voter potentials among other parties in

[5]Theoretically speaking, parties could aim to attract voters regardless of the specific nature of their considerations set. However, from a rational perspective and due to limited resources, such an unguided strategy seems both risky and unpromising.

order to take office or facilitate their policy goals. As Adams (2012) concludes in his literature review, several hypotheses regarding the re-positioning vis-á-vis competitor parties derived from this rational-choice perspective of party positioning are supported by comparative analyses. Parties adapt their left-right position in response to public opinion shifts (Adams et al. 2004; Adams et al. 2006; Ezrow et al. 2011) and, more importantly for our argument, to left-right shifts of rival parties (Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009), taking these shifts as information on the rival parties' voters' location. In a more recent study, Williams (2015) finds that ideologically close parties competing for the same bloc of voters adapt their ideological positions vis-á-vis each other more often than ideologically distant parties.

While these are very important findings, they are only approximations to measure parties' perceptions of their voter potentials among their rival parties' electorates. All studies following Downs seminal work are based on the assumption that political parties continuously (re)adapt their policy positions to reflect each new configuration of party support by voters (Laver 2005, p. 266). This implies that parties are assumed to act as if they knew where their voter potentials are located. However, whether they actually perceive their electoral potentials among rival parties correctly has not been tested yet. Reconsidering the theoretical arguments of the spatial model of party competition, we thus contribute to the literature by providing such a test to shed light on one of the core assumptions of spatial models of party competition. How parties perceive their electoral potentials among other parties and whether their perceptions are correct is still an almost unexplored field.[6] Our study, therefore, extends the classical literature in the field of political competition. First, we ask whether political parties' perceptions of their potentials to win voters from other parties are indeed driven by spatial considerations. As discussed above, the literature on voters' consideration sets supports the claim that they are substantively structured by left-right proximities (van der Eijk and Niemöller 1983; Tillie 1995; Wagner 2017). We do not know whether parties' perceptions are structured in the same way, but earlier research at least suggests that they do react to spatial factors. As the original work of Downs argues that voters and parties alike perceive

[6]To our knowledge the only notable study in this context was conducted by Weßels (2016). However, his study focuses on the perception of candidates running for seats in German single-member districts and their individual campaigning instead of general party strategies. Nevertheless, the findings are consistent with our approach as Weßels concludes that the perceptions of chances to win votes from another party's candidate are driven, among other factors, by spatial considerations, namely left-right proximities.

competition in a one-dimensional space, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H1: The closer a party perceives a rival party to be located regarding the left-right dimension, the higher it perceives its potential to win voters from the respective rival.

Secondly, we investigate whether political parties perceive their voter potentials among other parties' electorates correctly. Here, we follow the implicit assumption underlying research on parties' strategic (re-)positioning that parties have at least some reliable information on where their actual voter potentials are located. Probably, this information is far from perfect. Downs (1957, 45, 62, 77f) himself already acknowledged model-inherent problems due to uncertainty and lack of information on the parties' side with regards to voters' policy preferences. However, for the spatial model of competition to work, there has to be some positive relationship between perceived and actual voter potentials:

H2: Political parties' perceptions of their voter potentials among other parties' electorates correspond to their actual voter potentials.

Any misperception of such voter potential can have severe consequences, not only for the parties themselves but also for the working of representative democracies: Strategic behavior by parties aiming at increasing their vote shares and also behavior aiming at being responsive becomes ineffective or even counter-productive if the competitive situation is perceived incorrectly. Hence, it seems crucial to understand the reasons leading to such potential misperceptions. A precondition for the correct perception of the potential to attract new voters is that both perceived and actual potentials are based on a similar logic, in this case competition regarding the left-right dimension. We know that this is the case for voters. By testing our first hypothesis (H1), we test if this applies to parties as well. Nevertheless, even if parties' perceptions and voters' considerations sets are indeed defined by a Downsian logic, possible differences might occur. If one party (the possibly receiving party) perceives another party (the target party) to be relatively close in terms of left-right, whereas the voters of the target party see vast differences between the left-right positions of both parties, the receiving party will overestimate the potential to attract voters from that specific target party — despite relying on the same logic to come to this conclusion. This argument is again supported by Downs himself and the incorporation of uncertainty into his model. It is not only parties that lack fully correct perceptions of

voters' policy preferences but also voters who are uncertain where parties are actually positioned (van der Eijk and Niemöller 1983; Tillie 1995; Wagner 2017). Following up on this, many previous studies show, for example, that voters do not unanimously perceive party positions or their shifts correctly due to various factors such as information provided by the media or varying issue saliency (Alvarez and Franklin 1994; Banducci et al. 2017; Busch 2016; Plescia and Staniek 2017; Adams et al. 2011). At the same time, left-right constitutes a "super issue" (Klingemann and Inglehart 1976, p. 244) or an "amorphous vessel" (Huber and Inglehart 1995, p. 90) without a fixed meaning for different actors or in different contexts. This can also result in variation of placements regarding the left-right dimension. Hence, parties might be limited in maximizing their vote gains even when behaving strategically. We therefore assume that different perceptions of left-right proximities between voters and parties lead to deviations of political parties' perceived potential from their actual potential. More precisely, if parties perceive bigger distances between themselves and the target party than voters do, we expect them to underestimate their potentials. At the same time, bigger perceived left-right distances on the voters' side should lead to overestimated potentials. Hence, we formulate a third hypothesis to be tested in this study:

H3: Parties' ability to correctly perceive their voter potentials depends on the correspondence of perceptions of left-right proximities between parties and voters.

As mentioned above, party utility is not determined by spatial proximities alone. Hence, it seems obvious that (biases of) parties' perceptions of voter potentials are not only a function of spatial factors. In our context, non-spatial qualities of the receiving and target parties might also play a role. For example, research on party utility has argued that party size is a relevant characteristic predicting party utility for voters (Tillie 1995; van der Eijk et al. 1996). Hence, as we assume certain similarities between parties and voters, party size might as well influence parties' perceptions of voter potentials and their perceptions of ideological proximities. Although our study explicitly focusses on (testing assumptions of) the spatial model of party competition as a necessary first step, we control for party size and a number of additional non-spatial factors in the robustness section below.

3 Data and Operationalization

We analyze the match between parties' perceptions and their actual voter potentials at the 2017 federal elections in Germany to investigate in how far political parties (are able to) perceive their potentials to attract voters from other parties correctly. While our arguments and framework are applicable to all multi-party electoral contexts, it requires comparable data on the elite as well as mass level which is not available for many countries at this point. For this study, we combine data from the 2017 candidate survey (Roßteutscher et al. 2018b) and the 2017 post-election voter survey (Roßteutscher et al. 2018a) of the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES).[7] There are several reasons why Germany in general and the 2017 elections in particular constitute a good test case for our theoretical arguments. The dominance of proportional representation in the German mixed-member system results in a multi-party system providing voters with multiple opportunities to switch votes not only from government to opposition parties (or vice versa) but also within the camps of opposition and government parties. Steadily increasing volatility levels since the 2000s — with an all-time record in 2017 — show that people indeed use those vote switching opportunities and its relevance at the election under consideration. Related to that, for the first time since the German unification in 1990 a new, right-wing populist party gained parliamentary representation, the Alternative for Germany (AfD). Building on state-level electoral success and the salience of immigration issues, they developed into a major competitor in the 2017 election. The growing success of the AfD did not only change the number of relevant political parties competing for votes but also decreased the German party systems stability in terms of its moderate ideological polarization (Arzheimer 2015). In such situations it is particularly difficult for political parties to correctly perceive their actual voter potentials. Thus, this provides us with a rather conservative test. Finding patterns for the 2017 election in Germany makes it highly plausible that similar patterns can be found in more stable party systems.[8] At the same time, characteristics similar to those just outlined can be found in most European democracies and beyond, which gives this study some additional weight when inferring validity of our results for other contexts.

[7] Detailed information on the studies and their design can be found in the study descriptions (Roßteutscher et al. 2018a, 2018b).

[8] In the robustness test section below, we also show that our arguments hold for the 2013 German federal election which took place under substantively different conditions.

Our measure of the parties' perceptions is derived from the candidate survey that was carried out immediately after the 2017 election. The population comprises all candidates of the six biggest and most relevant political parties in Germany: the conservative Christian Democratic Union/ Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU; Union),[9] the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), the Alliance 90/the Greens (Greens), the post-socialist Left, the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP), and the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD). The candidate survey provides us with the unique opportunity to base our party measure on data of a large N mid- to high-level elite survey. Similar approaches have been successfully used to measure party policy positions (Giger and Lefkofridi 2014; Önnudóttir 2014),[10] campaign strategies and efforts (Karlsen and Skogerbø 2015; Giebler and Wüst 2011) or, more recently, a party's degree of populism (Lewandowsky et al. 2016).

Electoral candidates for national elections constitute crucial actors not only for campaign communication but also internally for the party's organization and programmatic portfolio. Depending on the organizational structure, the most important decisions might still be made by a small circle of party officials. However, as the party leadership has to rely on the support of mid- and lower-level elites and also has to ensure some party homogeneity, it seems highly likely that perspectives of these elites provide crucial guidelines and information for strategic decision-making. Hence, how candidates perceive their parties' voter potential among other parties' electorates is important for strategic behavior even in a situation in which candidates are not making strategic decisions directly.

The candidate survey enables us to develop not only a direct but also valid measure of the perceived voter potential (PVP) by using a survey item called "propensities to win votes" (PTWV). The candidates were asked to evaluate the probability that their party will ever win votes from other parties. For each competitor, respondents were asked to express their evaluation on an 11-point scale, ranging from 1 = "not at all probable to win votes" to 11 = "very probable to win votes".[11]

[9]Due to the special relationship of the CDU and CSU with the latter only competing in Bavaria and the former not competing there and also because the two parties form a single faction in the federal parliament, we follow common practice and treat them as a single party.

[10]For a more detailed discussion of, e.g., the advantages and disadvantages of different techniques to derive party policy positions see de Swaan (1973), Mair (2001) or Banducci et al. (2017).

[11]A table with summary statistics of all our variables can be found in the supplementary material (Table A3).

Our measure of PVP is an aggregate measure on a party pair level, i.e. we determine the perceived voter potentials of party r with regards to party t (PVP_{rt}). PVP_{rt} represents the mean PTWV which the candidates of party r express for the electorate of party t. Our units of analysis are therefore combinations of receiving (party r) and target parties (party t). Since we are dealing with six parties, this leaves us with 30 receiving-target party pairs.

For our measure of the actual voter potential (AVP) receiving parties have among the electorate of a specific target party, we use data from the post-election voter study. We measure AVPs using "propensities to vote" (PTV), that resemble the PTWVs on the political demand side. Respondents — in this case voters — were asked for their individual probability to ever vote for the different political parties on an 11-point scale ranging from 1 = "not at all probable" to 11 = "very probable."[12] Going back to van der Eijk and Niemöller (1983), PTVs are an established tool in electoral research to measure party utility and, based on that, to depict voters' consideration sets as well as voter potentials of political parties (Kroh et al. 2007; Marsh 2006; Tillie 1995; Van Der Eijk and Oppenhuis 1991; Wagner 2017). To derive AVPs, we aggregate individual-level PTVs for all voters of a party with regards to each competitor. The equivalent to PVP_{rt} (indicating the voter potential party r perceives to have among the electorate of party t) has to be a measure that represents the inclination of voters of party t to vote for party r.[13] Hence, party r's potential among the electorate of party t (AVP_{rt}) equals the mean PTV score of party t*'s* voters for party r.

In order to test our hypotheses, we need to develop party and voter measures of perceived left-right proximities. Above, we argued that the left-right dimension still represents a crucial orientation for voters. In an additional analysis, we also show that this argument holds empirically.[14] For the *par-*

[12]For Bavarian respondents, we replaced the PTV responses for the CDU with their responses for the CSU.

[13]In national elections in Germany, citizens can cast two votes. Party voters are those who reported voting for the respective party with their second vote (party vote) in the 2017 election.

[14]To validate the relevance of the left-right dimension explicitly for the purpose of our study, we calculated three conditional logit models regressing vote choice at the German Federal Election 2017 a) on perceived left-right proximities, b) on proximities regarding three policy issues covering the most dominant sub-dimensions (immigration, welfare/taxation, environmental protection) and c) on both. The results of the analyses as well as some information on the operationalization can be found in the supplementary material (Tables A1 and A2).They suggest, firstly, that left-right congruence does not only exert an independent but also the strongest effect of all four predictors on vote choice. Secondly, comparing the BICs of the general left-right dimensions and the policy issues

ties' perceived left-right proximities (PLRP), we calculate the absolute difference between the left-right position of receiving party r (LR_r) and party r's perceived left-right position of target party t (LR_{rt}), where LR_r is the mean left-right placement of party r by its candidates and LR_{rt} the mean left-right placement of party t by party candidates measured on an 11-point scale. The variable is then recoded so that higher values represent high proximities and used to test Hypothesis 1. The similarities between AVPs and PVPs reveal the validity of Hypothesis 2. We also hypothesize that deviations of PVPs and AVPs are conditional on the variation of perceived positions on the left-right dimension by parties and voters. For Hypothesis 3, the *deviation between the parties' and voters' perceived left-right proximities* is measured by subtracting $PLRP_{rt}$ from a corresponding measure for voters, $VLRP_{rt}$.[15]

For all measures based on the candidate survey, we use post-stratification weights adjusting to the distribution of the population of all candidates regarding party affiliation, gender, age, and type of candidacy (constituency, list, and dual candidacy) to additionally increase representativeness. Similarly, we calculate all measures based on the voter survey using weights adjusting for sampling design and non-response.

Although our analyses are based on only 30 party pairs, we need to account for the peculiar data structure with observations nested in a cross-classification of receiving and target parties. We would not expect evaluations of voter potentials by a receiving party to be independent when looking at different target parties. At the same time, one and the same target party is evaluated by each receiving party, which also sheds doubt on the independence of estimation errors. Accordingly, we calculate standard errors based on cross-classified multi-level linear regression models. Furthermore, we need to take into account the small number of cases, especially on the level of receiving and target parties. Here, we rely on existing methodological

model we see that the former actually fits the data better. Thus, we can conclude that voters still use the left-right dimension as a heuristic when making their vote choice and that the predictions do not improve if a more complex, multi-dimensional approach is used.

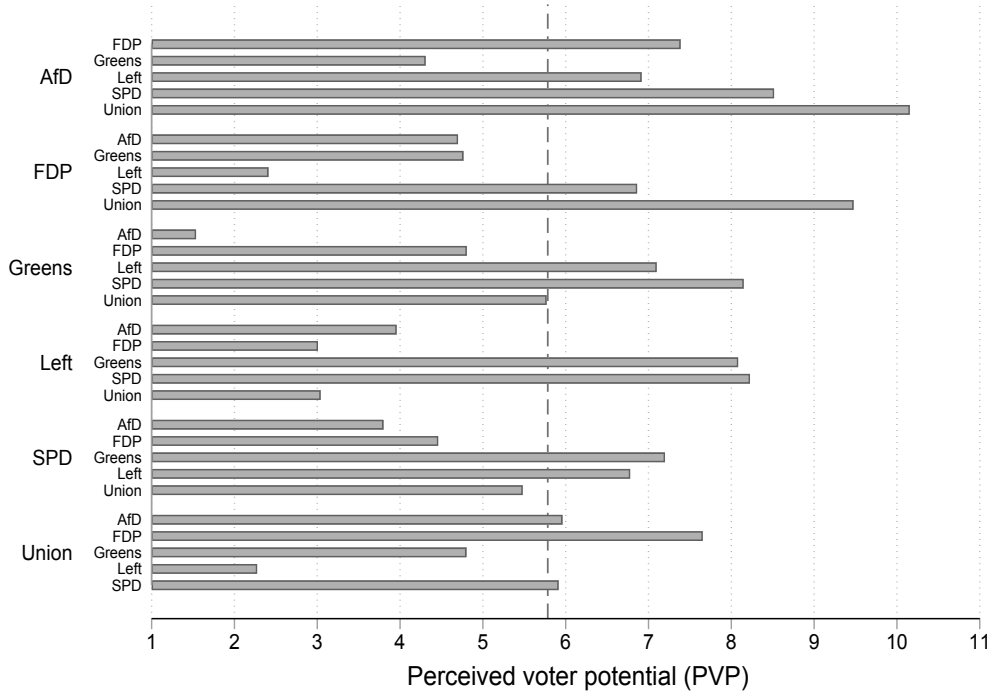
[15]Using the voter survey, $VLRP_{rt}$ is based on the same left-right scale as used in the candidate survey. However, the measure has to be calculated in relative terms to the respondents' left-right position to be in line with the logic of the spatial voting model. We first determine the mean left-right proximity between party t's voters and their left-right placement of party t (LRP_{ego-t}). Secondly, we calculate the mean left-right proximity between party t's voters and their left-right placement of party r (LRP_{ego-r}). We then take the absolute difference of LRP_{ego-t} and LRP_{ego-r} to get $VLRP_{rt}$.

work which argues that restricted maximum-likelihood estimation as well as significance thresholds based on Satterthwaite's Degrees of Freedom approximation result in valid estimates (Elff et al. 2020).

4 Results

For our analyses, we start with providing some descriptive information on our main variable — the perceived voter potential (PVP). Fig. 1 displays PVP scores for each of the 30 party pairs. The bars are grouped by the receiving party and presented in alphabetical order. The vertical, dashed line refers to the average perceived potential, which is 5.78 and, hence, slightly below the midpoint of the PVP scale.

Figure 1: Perceived voter potential (PVP) by party pairs



Note: Own calculations based on Roßteutscher et al. (2018b). The dashed line represents the overall mean of PVP.

Several things become obvious: For one, there is tremendous variation

between party pairs. The values range from 1.5 (it seems unlikely to the Green party to win votes from the AfD) to 10.2 (from the perspective of the AfD it is highly likely that they win votes from the Union). Overall, the AfD is very optimistic as four out of five PVP scores are substantially larger than the overall mean. In contrast, most of the other parties and especially the Union perceive much lower voter potentials. Moreover, parties are in general skeptical about winning voters from the AfD while there seems to be a certain trend that voters of the SPD and the Union are seen as rather approachable for other parties. Based on how German parties are usually placed on the left-right dimension (e.g.,Kurella and Pappi 2015; Mader and Schoen 2016), we can carefully conclude that being closer to a rival party increases PVP scores — a first indication in support of our first hypothesis: The right-wing populist AfD as well as the liberal FDP are most optimistic to win voters from the Union, the Greens and the Left see the largest potentials within the SPD electorate. Conversely, the highest PVP of the SPD is for the Greens and of the Union for the FDP, respectively. To investigate the relationship between the PVP and the parties' perceived left-right proximities to a rival party (PLRP) more systematically, we estimated a cross-classified multi-level regression model with PVP as the dependent and PLRP as the predictor variable to test our first hypothesis. We also present an analogous model for actual voter potentials to validate the finding of previous studies that consideration sets are determined by spatial considerations (van der Eijk and Niemöller, 1983; Tillie, 1995; Wagner, 2017).

Table 1: Predicting PVP and AVP with perceived left-right proximities

DV:	PVP	AVP
Perceived left-right proximity by parties (PLRP)	1.01***	
	(0.13)	
Perceived left-right proximity by voters (VLRP)		1.17***
		(0.13)
Intercept	-1.37	-5.49***
	(1.15)	(1.13)
Random effects parameters		
σ^2 party pair-level	1.17	0.46
σ^2 target pair-level	0.36	0.16
σ^2 receiving pair-level	2.41	0.17
Adjusted R^2	0.22	0.78
N party pairs	30	30
N receiving parties	6	6
N target parties	6	6

Note: Cross-classified models with two higher-level units resulting in three variance components. Own calculations based on Roßteutscher et al. (2018a; 2018b). Standard errors are presented in brackets. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; significance levels based on Satterthwaite's Degrees of Freedom approximation.

The first model in Table 1 shows a significant effect of left-right proximities on PVP. In accordance with the theory of spatial party competition and our first hypothesis, the higher the perceived ideological proximity is, the higher perceived voter potentials become. This points to the fact, that parties indeed perceive the electorate of ideologically close target parties as likely voters. The second model supports this logic also for actual voter potentials: If the proximity between the target party and its voters is similar to the proximity between these voters and the receiving party, the AVP for the latter is higher. Finally, we find that left-right distances seem to be much more important for voters than for parties as the adjusted R^2-values indicate that the variance in AVPs can be much better explained by left-right proximities than the variance in PVPs.[16] Both groups of actors perceive competition from a spatial perspective but this seems to be much more the case for voters than for parties. However, and this is important to emphasize, this neither means that PVPs and AVPs for specific party pairs are identical, nor that parties and voters locate parties identically on the left-right dimension. The remainder of our analyses will deal with these two aspects represented in our second and third hypothesis.

As a next step of our analysis, we compare PVPs to their AVPs, thereby investigating whether parties actually know where their voter potentials among other parties are located (Hypothesis 2). Fig. 2 shows the degree to which a receiving party's perception of being able to win votes from a specific target party corresponds to the actual potential of voters of the latter party to defect to the receiving party. The figure consists of six subplots — one for each of the parties under analysis. The diagonal lines represent a perfect fit between PVP and AVP. Values above that line indicate a situation in which the receiving party overestimates its electoral potential while values below represent a higher AVP than actually perceived.

Overall, and with the clear exception of the AfD, PVP is similar to AVP more often than not.[17] This is especially true for the CDU/CSU, the Greens and the SPD. However, there are some deviations from the diagonal line beyond the AfD, indicating that the parties' PVPs among other parties only moderately correspond to their AVPs.[18] Notably, the four smaller opposi-

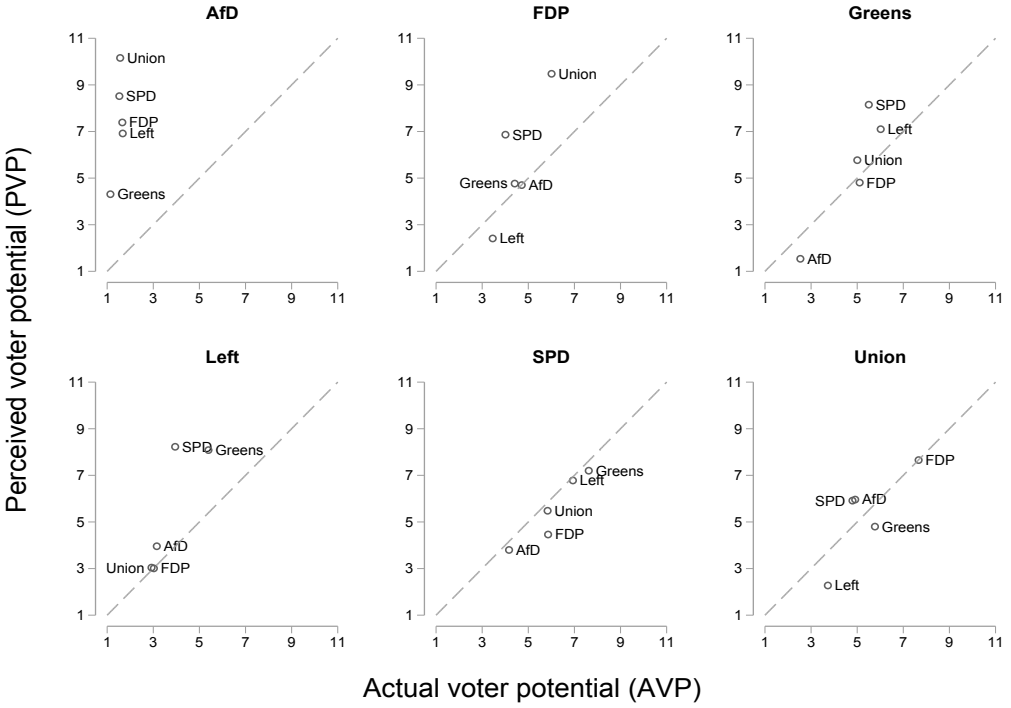
[16] How or even whether to calculate R^2-values for multi-level models is a highly contested issue. We follow the approach outlined by Hox (2010, p. 71).

[17] The supplementary material holds a combined figure showing all 30 data points (Figure A1) which might allow for an easier grasp of the overall pattern.

[18] The correlation (N = 25) equals 0.68 if the AfD is excluded and drops to 0.18 with all 30 cases.

tion parties tend to overestimate their voter potential — again, with the AfD being much more overconfident than the other three parties — while the CDU/CSU and the SPD tend to underestimate their potentials.[19] There is also a clear pattern when looking at the figure from a target-party perspective: Parties tend to overestimate their potential when it comes to the SPD and CDU/CSU voters. In eight out of ten cases in which one of these two parties is the target party, PVP is larger than AVP.

Figure 2: Perceived voter potential (PVP) and actual voter potential (AVP) by receiving party



Note: Own calculations based on Roßteutscher et al. (2018a; 2018b).

Up to this point, we have shown that PVPs and AVPs are significantly

[19]In the robustness section below, we exclude cases involving the AfD as receiving or target party from the analyses. This, however, does not change the results of any of the models substantially. In other words, even if the AfD shows differences to other parties in terms of the PVP or the difference between PVP and AVP, these differences can be explained by the same logic as the other cases.

determined by left-right spatial considerations, speaking in favor of our hypothesis (H1), but also that actual voter potentials are structured much more strongly by such considerations than parties' perceptions. Against this background, our finding that perceptions are not equally correct in all instances becomes plausible, speaking against a full validation of our second hypothesis (H2). If voters strongly rely on simplifications in terms of the left-right heuristic when developing their consideration sets while parties do not consider left-right spatial considerations particularly relevant for determining their voter potentials among rival parties, misperceptions of the latter come as no surprise. However, we argued above (H3) that for the correctness of PVP it is also decisive to what extent left-right positions are ascribed identically by parties and voters respectively. Calculating a simple correlation between the two proximity measures results in a correlation coefficient of 0.77. This clearly is a strong correlation, but as the two measures are supposed to represent the same empirical feature only from different angles, namely, the spatial structure of the German party system in the eyes of parties and voters – the differences are considerable. For testing in how far different perceptions of left-right proximities between parties and voters account for voter potential misperceptions, we run an additional regression with the same estimation strategy as described above. The dependent variable is calculated by subtracting AVP scores from PVP scores, implying that positive values indicate an overestimation of electoral potential by the parties. We use the differences in left-right perceptions between parties and voters to predict the deviation between AVPs and PVPs. Any significant effect resembles a conditioning effect of variations of perceived left-right placements.

Taking into account that we can only rely on a limited number of cases, the model performs extremely well (Table 2). The coefficient measuring differences in left-right proximities (PLRP minus VLRP) is positive and indeed highly significant. Substantively, this shows that if a party perceives the proximity to a target party as higher than the proximity is perceived by the voters of the target party, it overestimates its voter potential. This finding is clearly in line with our expectations. Left-right ideology plays an important role not just in explaining perceived and actual voter potential but also in explaining differences between the two, as stated in our third hypothesis (H3). However, considering the rather low R^2-value (0.21), differences in left-right positioning alone do not seem to be sufficient for explaining misperceptions of voter potentials. Spatial considerations matter, but parties and voters come to different results when locating parties and it seems necessary to think about additional factors able to explain differences in perceived and actual potentials in future studies.

Table 2: Explaining differences between PVP and AVP

DV: PVP minus AVP	
PLRP minus VLRP (left-right differences)	0.81^{***}
	(0.20)
Intercept	2.50^{**}
	(0.94)
Random effects parameters	
σ^2 party pair-level	0.96
σ^2 target pair-level	0.86
σ^2 receiving pair-level	3.90
Adjusted R^2	0.21
N party pairs	30
N receiving parties	6
N target parties	6

Note: Cross-classified models with two higher-level units resulting in three variance components. Own calculations based on Roßteutscher et al. (2018a; 2018b). Standard errors are presented in brackets. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; significance levels based on Satterthwaite's Degrees of Freedom approximation.

5 Robustness Checks

All in all, the patterns we find are consistent with the theoretical argument. Furthermore, we have chosen an appropriate estimation approach to deal with the peculiar data structure. Nevertheless, it seems necessary to provide additional support for our findings before presenting our conclusions. Therefore, we conducted a number of robustness checks for both our PVP model (Table 1) and our model predicting the difference between PVP and AVP (Table 2) by calculating several additional models. The estimated coefficients for our left-right proximity variables and their 95 per cent confidence intervals are plotted in Fig. 3. The left part of the figure shows the results of the robustness checks for our PVP model and the right part of Fig. 3 presents those for the PVP-minus-AVP model. For comparison, we also added the estimates from our main models presented in Tables 1 (PVP) and 2 (PVP-minus-AVP). Hence, the figure provides easily accessible information on whether our predictors indeed have the expected effect regardless of different model modifications.

First of all, the number of cases to test our theoretical argument is small, resulting in vulnerability to outliers and influential cases. Jackknife testing represents a typical approach to investigate the existence of influential cases. Rerunning our main estimation models leaving out one case at a time (M1), we are left with substantially identical confidence intervals for both models.[20]

Looking for influential cases can also be done from a theoretical point of view. With the AfD, our analyses include a party showing very large deviations between PVP and AVP. Furthermore, the AfD was still a rather young party in 2017, which makes it more difficult for other parties to evaluate their voter potentials among this specific target party's electorate. Therefore, we calculated two additional models for our PVP as well as for our PVP-minus-AVP model. M2 excludes the AfD as the receiving and M3 as the target party. From Fig. 3 we can deduce that there are, again, no substantial differences between the models excluding cases with the AfD as a member of a party pair and our main models.

Influential cases can be inspected from yet another perspective: by accounting for heterogeneity at the level of the individual candidates. It seems reasonable to assume that more experienced candidates perceive their parties' voter potential as well as spatial proximities differently or more accurate

[20]More information on the Jackknife estimations and the other models calculated for the robustness checks can be found in section B of the supplementary material. For the results of those models see Tables B2 and B3.

than inexperienced candidates, or that their perceptions are based on different grounds.[21]

Another relevant distinction can be made with regards to the candidates' positions within the party. In this respect, one could argue that perceptions of candidates higher up the party ladder are more influential on the parties' strategic orientations. Hence, we conducted additional analyses for 2017 comparing voter potential (mis-)perceptions of a) experienced and inexperienced candidates and b) of elected and unelected candidates.[22] First of all, comparing the correlations of PVP- and AVP- scores reveals that, on average, experienced candidates do not perceive the voter potentials of their parties among other parties more correctly than inexperienced candidates. The same applies to the distinction between elected and unelected candidates.[23] Furthermore, we calculated four additional PVP- and PVP-minus-AVP models, for which PVP- and PLRP-scores were aggregated across the four different subsamples of individual candidates mentioned above (M4 and M5). The results of Models M4 and M5 suggest that there are no substantial differences with regards to the effects of our proximity measures between experienced (M4a) and unexperienced candidates (M4b) and also not between elected (M5a) and unelected candidates (M5b).

The second set of robustness tests concerns the electoral context. So far, we only presented results for a single election in a single country. As an additional robustness test we applied our analytical models to a different context, namely to that of the German Federal Elections of 2013. There are several reasons why the patterns of party competition at the 2013 elections can be considered significantly different from the situation in 2017. First of all, the 2013 elections took place under a liberal-conservative government coalition (CDU/CSU and FDP) whereas in 2017, a grand coalition (CDU/CSU and SPD) was in charge. Therefore, in the 2013 election campaign, a center-right

[21]At a first glance, one could also assume that low levels of experience could be another factor driving the substantially less correct perceptions by the AfD. However, AfD candidates are, on average, not substantially less experienced than those of the FDP or the Left — two parties that have relatively realistic voter potential perceptions (cf. Table B1 in the supplementary material). This relates to the fact that the AfD also attracted politicians from other parties to their cause and not only political newcomers.

[22]We consider the status of being elected as being a proxy for a candidate's standing or influence within the party, respectively. For the operationalization of political experience see Table B1 in the supplementary material.

[23]See also Figure B1 for a graphical representation of the strong similarity between the groups.

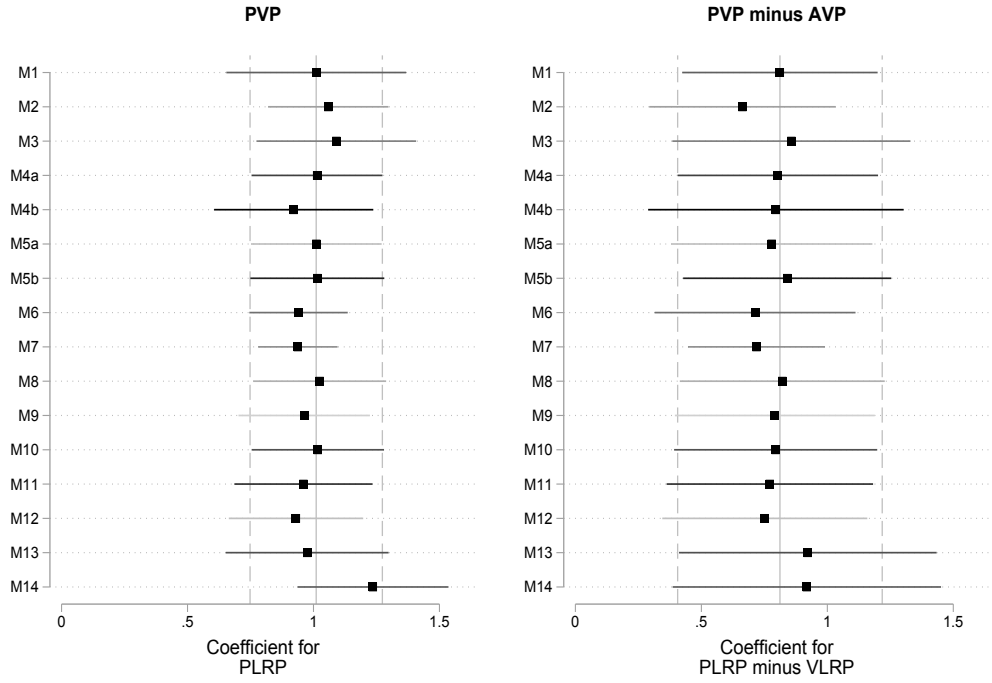
government ran against a center-left government-in-waiting. In contrast, in 2017, the two largest parties governed together, curbing the campaign's intensity. Moreover, the AfD had a different party profile than it has now, showing a center-right rather than a far-right ideological position, resulting in a less polarized German party system than in 2017. Besides, only founded in 2013, the AfD as a completely new player and its electorate were even more difficult to evaluate for the other parties in terms of chances of winning over voters. Lastly, the 2017 election campaign was dominated by the migration issue, which strengthened the AfD's role in terms of competition, but did not play a role in 2013. Considering the different competitive situation the 2013 elections took place under, re-running our models on data of the 2013 elections serves as an appropriate test for the validity of our findings.[24]

In addition, we calculated models in which we pooled the 2013 and 2017 observations and included a dummy variable for the election year. The results of the 2013 as well as the pooled model are presented as M6 and M7 in Fig. 3. Again, the results are substantially identical compared to our main models.[25]

[24]Analogously to our 2017 models, we combine data from the 2013 federal election candidate survey (Rattinger et al., 2014) and the post-election voter survey (Rattinger et al., 2017) from the GLES 2013. The operationalization of the variables is identical to that described in the research design section above.

[25]Furthermore, the election year dummy of model M7 did not show significant effects on PVP or PVP-minus-AVP (see tables B2 and B3 in the supplementary material), meaning that parties, on average, perceived their voter potentials not differently or more correctly in 2013 than 2017.

Figure 3: Perceived voter potential (PVP) and actual voter potential (AVP) by receiving party



Note: Results of cross-classified models with two higher-level units as described in the methods section; regression coefficients and 95% confidence intervals. Own calculations based on Roßteutscher et al.(2018b; 2018a) and Rattinger et al. (2014; 2017). Solid vertical line represents the coefficients from the main models and the dashed lines their 95% confidence intervals (Table 1 and Table 2). Graphical presentation is based on Stata's 'coefplot' command (Jann 2014). M1 = Jackknife test; M2 = exclusion of AfD as receiving party; M3 = exclusion of AfD as target party; M4a = experienced candidates only; M4b = inexperienced candidates only; M5a = elected candidates only; M5b = unelected candidates only; M6 = application to the 2013 Federal election; M7 = pooled model; M8 = size of receiving party as control; M9 = size of target party as control; M10 = vote gains of receiving party as control; M11 = vote gains of target party as control; M12 = relative vote gains as control; M13= political camp as control; M14 = calculation of dependent variable based on median.

Thirdly, there might be factors influencing parties' perceptions of their voter potentials among rival parties' electorates that, at the same time, influence their perceptions of perceived left-right proximities. Indeed, there are

some aspects of parties which are logically, or at least theoretically, linked to (relative) left-right positions as outlined by the spatial model of competition. If not accounted for, this could result in biased estimates of our effects for PLRP and PLRP-minus-VLRP. The first potentially relevant factor in this regard concerns party size of both the target and the receiving parties. Another potential factor that could impact the correspondence of PVP and AVP on the one hand and PLRD and VLRD on the other is whether the receiving and target party belong to the same political camp. In order to avoid omitted variable bias, we calculated several additional PVP and PVP-minus-AVP models in which we controlled for several factors, each at a time: The receiving and target parties' size (M8 and M9), vote gains (M10 and M11) as well as their relative vote gains (M12) and whether both members of the party pair belong to the same political camp (M13).[26] As Fig. 3 shows, in each of the models including a control variable, our proximity measures still have positive and statistically significant effects. Furthermore, none of the control variables show statistically significant effects in either model.

As a final check of the robustness of our findings, we calculated our main models using an alternative operationalization of our dependent variables. As measures based on the mean of a distribution are especially sensitive to outliers, we recalculated our PVP and AVP measures using the median of the PTWV- and PTV-distributions.[27] The coefficients for our independent variable are, again, substantively identical to those in the main models (M14). Without a doubt, the robustness checks imply that our findings are stable, not only when potentially influential cases are excluded, the sample of individual candidates for calculating PVP and PLRP is restricted to experienced or elected candidates only or when our models are applied to other electoral contexts. The results also hold if factors potentially distorting the effects of our left-right proximity variables are controlled for and an alternative operationalization for our dependent variable is used. We take this as encouragement that we indeed provided a strong and reliable test for our hypotheses in the prior section.

[26]For a variable description see Table B1 in the supplementary material.

[27]Furthermore, this operationalization resembles the theoretical concept of the median voter theorem of the spatial theory of party competition. However, for our main models we chose to follow common practice of empirical research on party (re-)positioning, which is using mean values.

6 Conclusion

For political parties, one way of achieving the goal of maximizing their vote share is to attract voters from rival parties. Consequently, parties have to be aware of the competitive situation in the sense that they should know what electoral potentials they have among other parties' voters. Previous studies have shown that parties adapt their left-right position in response to public opinion shifts and to left-right shifts of rival parties. We argued that these findings do not necessarily imply that parties perceive their voter potentials among these rivals correctly. Focusing on this capability, we reconsidered the theoretical arguments of the spatial model of party competition by asking in how far parties' perceptions of their voter potentials indeed match their actual voter potentials. We thus looked at one of the crucial preconditions for parties' strategic behavior when it comes to vote maximizing that has not been investigated yet.

For the empirical investigation, we developed very robust, yet straightforward measures of perceived and actual voter potentials for all relevant parties in a multi-party setting relying on elite- and mass-level survey data. Applying these measures to the 2017 federal election in Germany, the major findings of our study are the following: Firstly, the extent to which a party considers the voters of a rival party as potential voters depends on the perceived left-right proximity to that rival. Secondly, we established that, in general, there is a positive relationship between perceived and actual voter potentials. However, this correlation is not very strong. This means that not all parties perceive their voter potential correctly and, hence, are able to apply objectively correct strategies of vote maximization. Even if the party which misperceives its voter potentials the most — the AfD — is excluded from the analyses, the overall correspondence is not perfect. Thirdly, we explored in how far spatial factors can account for voter potential misperceptions. Both perceived and actual voter potentials are structured by left-right considerations, albeit to different extents. This implies that parties' voter potential misperceptions cannot be a consequence of parties and voters applying completely different logics when thinking about political competition. However, our results suggest that parties and voters do not locate political actors identically on the left-right dimension. This might be due to diverging understandings of what left and right actually mean or due to factors limiting the supply- and demand-side's capabilities to perceive positions correctly. We showed that there is a systematic link between perceptual differences (between parties and voters) and the correctness of voter potential perceptions. If parties perceive themselves to be ideologically closer to the voters of other parties than they actually are, they overestimate their elec-

toral potentials. To validate our findings, we conducted several robustness checks, none of which led to substantially different results compared to our main models. For example, distinguishing between different groups of candidates (experienced vs. inexperienced or MPs vs. unsuccessful candidates) or controlling for non-spatial and contextual factors had no effects. Even excluding the AfD — which is not only a different animal when compared to other German parties, but which is also rather bad in evaluating its voter potential from rival parties correctly — does not change the results. Explaining the AfD's too positive evaluations of its chances to win votes from rival parties is beyond the scope of this paper. As our robustness tests show, this cannot be traced back to different levels of political experience because AfD politicians do not differ systematically from those of the FDP or the Left. Yet, it is noteworthy that the AfD perceives its own position far more centrist on the left-right scale than the voters it wants to attract do. In other words, the placement of the party differs a lot between the party's perspective and those of the citizens. While other factors may play a role for the too positive evaluations, for example, over-the-top optimism due to a strong increase in vote share since its foundation in early 2013, one can conclude that spatial misperceptions seem to be of high importance.

Our study constitutes a first step on a novel research agenda. Considering the only moderate explanatory power of our models, left-right proximities and variation in these perceptions alone are obviously not sufficient to explain how voter potential (mis-)perceptions come about. Beyond this empirical argument, research on parties and citizens alike shows that electoral behavior is not just influenced by spatial considerations but also by many other factors. As party utility and the resulting consideration sets are not only based on spatial but also on non-spatial factors, it seems necessary for future research to consider non-spatial party characteristics for explaining the (correctness of) parties' perceived voter potentials more explicitly. This could, for example, also include moderating effects of party size or party leader popularity on the impact of spatial factors.

Even if future studies stick to the spatial framework, it will be necessary to extend our approach to more complex conceptualizations of competition – namely two- or even multi-dimensional competitive spaces. Future research should therefore investigate spatial party competition regarding other, more specific issue dimensions, as well as how varying levels of issue salience might condition both perceived and actual voter potentials. Salience depends on contexts which themselves provide additional features that potentially affect parties' abilities to correctly perceive potentials – for example, the number of competing parties, party system fragmentation, electoral institutions or

the degree of voter de-alignment. While the 2017 federal election provides an instructive test case and while we can show that results are valid also for the substantively different electoral context of 2013, it will be instructive to apply our approach to and test our hypotheses also in larger-scale comparative set-ups. Lastly, we want to point out that the focus of this study was on political parties in order to build a bridge to the most influential literature looking at party competition and party strategies. The data used, however, also allows for carrying out analyses on the level of individual candidates. This would bring about an even more nuanced picture of how voter potentials are perceived by political elites and what factors distort these perceptions, for example, politician-specific factors such as personality traits, chances of winning the mandate, perception biases or regional peculiarities. Considering, again, the results for the AfD it might also be worthwhile to investigate the effect of populist attitudes on voter potential perceptions.

Overall, the analysis represents a valid addition to but also has several implications for the literature dealing with spatial party competition. To start with, our study provides empirical evidence for a core assumption of the spatial model which has never been tested explicitly: Parties indeed perceive their voter potentials among rival parties based on left-right proximities. This also underlines the continuing relevance of the left-right dimension for structuring party competition. However, we also show that not all parties are equally able to perceive their voter potentials correctly. While we agree that parties adapt their positions with the goal of winning votes from other parties — as the Downsian approach suggests — some of them, as we show, act on the basis of rather incorrect information and assumptions. In other words, party behavior might be rational but at the same time does not lead to optimal results. More generally, this also speaks in favor of allowing for more party-specific models of competition. Finally, the findings stress the importance for researchers in the field of spatial competition to consider different perceptions of left-right competition and placements. Earlier research already pointed out that there is variation between citizens in this regard. This study provides evidence that there are also differences between parties as well as between citizens and parties. Moreover, these differences are systematic in the sense that they are connected to deviations of perceived and actual voter potentials.

Building strategies to attract rival parties' voters based on their perceptions of voter potentials works better for some parties than for others. Although several other factors determine parties' perceptions, they need to understand the spatial nature of competition in order to perceive their voter potentials correctly, and consequently, to make strategically correct decisions. More precisely, they need to understand how voters of different parties per-

ceive competition on relevant dimensions of political conflict. These findings are not a challenge to the Downsian model and more recent work by, for example, Adams and others. On the contrary, a core assumption of the spatial approach is validated by our study — keeping in mind all the problems of generalizing from a single-case study. However, the picture is more complex than existing studies assume. The spatial mechanisms at work differ not in their effect for perceiving voter potentials but in their substantive quality. Consequently, future studies should allow for more heterogeneity of parties' capacities which, at the same time, could be used as an additional explanatory factor of party success or failure.

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